

Do youth delegates at the UN have an influence on public international law?

Antonia Kuhn

2020-04-15T09:00:25

Young people, mostly defined as people aged between 15 and 24 [in the UN context](#) (for more information on the definition of youth, see [here](#)), are generally underrepresented in political processes at national and international levels. Youth participation programs, including youth delegate programs, aim at alleviating this underrepresentation. At the United Nations, youth delegate programs were first envisaged by the member states in 1981 (for a comprehensive overview over the development of the UN's work with youth, see [here](#) and [here](#)). In [General Assembly resolution A/36/17](#), they encouraged each other to “consider the inclusion of youth representatives in their national delegations to the General Assembly and to other relevant United Nations meetings”. Starting from a single-digit number in 1981, 40 states complied with this call in 2019. The number varies annually, depending inter alia on the General Assembly's agenda and local circumstances. As design and financing lies with the member states, the programs differ widely.

The question that remains, however, is whether youth delegates can influence public international law. Based on my experiences as a former youth delegate, I attempt to answer this question by example of the work of the [German Youth Delegates to the UN General Assembly](#). Views presented here are my own.

German Youth Delegates to the UN General Assembly

The program of the Youth Delegates to the UN General Assembly is one of several German youth delegate programs to the United Nations (for other programs, see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), which are all run by different patrons and thus vary regarding their mandate and structure. This program endows two persons each year with a mandate to represent German youth in the UN General Assembly (GA) [Third Committee](#) (Social, Humanitarian & Cultural Issues) and the Economic and Social Council Commission for Social Development ([CSocD](#)). They are selected by the program's four patrons, which are the German United Nations Society ([DGVN e.V.](#)), the German National Committee for International Youth Work ([DNK](#)), the German Federal Foreign Office and the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth. [Applications are open](#) for all persons with German citizenship aged between 18 and 25. During their mandate, the youth delegates tour through Germany to gather young people's requests to decision makers, which they later present to the international community during their visit at the UN. The youth delegates' legitimization to speak on behalf of youth in Germany derives from their selection by the DNK, which represents all German youth organizations, i.e. a substantial amount of young people in Germany.

Advocacy work at the United Nations

At the UN, the youth delegates are accredited as advisors with the German delegation. In this capacity, they exchange their views with regular delegates on any given topic, focusing especially on resolutions negotiated in the GA Third Committee and the CSocD. They get the opportunity to make comments on the drafts beforehand, which the German diplomats may take into account during the resolution negotiations. This procedure has become well established for the [youth resolution](#) and is less usual for resolutions on other topics. During the negotiations, the youth delegates are allowed inside the room, but cannot speak on their own behalf.

Next to their advisory task, the youth delegates speak before the GA Third Committee and the CSocD. They indicate in their speech that they speak in their own capacity and thus not as representatives of government but of German youth. Nevertheless, they coordinate their speeches with the patrons of the program to make sure their positions do not manifestly contradict any official position of these institutions. The youth delegates also take part in and organize their own side events. These events provide a platform for their advocacy work with diplomats and UN staff. This work is facilitated by the issuing of delegates' passes to the UN, which allow the youth delegates to access all areas usually frequented by regular delegates only.

Gateways for youth delegates' influence on public international law

Norms of public international law at the UN are created through binding and non-binding resolutions. Resolutions are thus the gateway for youth delegates' influence on public international law. This happens most directly when, by commenting on a draft resolution, they manage to introduce new language into the text.

But there are more invisible ways of influence, too. Every interaction with diplomats and decision makers at the UN level opens an opportunity to make the youth perspective heard. Influence does not mean that one always gets their way, but rather that one's position is earnestly considered. Even if an interaction does not translate into language in a resolution, it might spark a better understanding of the youth perspective on a certain issue among those persons that the youth delegates interact with, which may lead to them taking the youth perspective into account on their own initiative in following resolutions. Interactions take place both during advisory tasks with the national delegation and at side events. While these interactions aim at persuading individuals of taking the youth perspective into account, the speeches before UN committees happen as part of the regular plenary debates and as such inform both individual delegates and the debate. As the youth delegates speak for themselves, they can voice things that regular delegates could not say (e.g. the youth delegates [demanded an end of all discrimination against queer families](#) already in 2014 before the CSocD). They can thus give new input into the debate, which can be revived by regular delegates. By doing so, they can stir the debate. As part of the regular plenary debate, the speeches can afterwards be found in the [official session records](#). They furthermore create visibility for youth as a stakeholder, which has been underlined by the [thanks expressed towards the youth delegates](#) for their contribution in the 57th CSocD by the president of the CSocD,

Mr. Cheiqh Niang from Senegal, and the Portuguese Ambassador Mr. Francisco Duarte Lopez. All in all, there are many ways in which youth delegates can advocate for the youth perspective, with their advocacy frequently impacting on the outcome of a resolution. Youth delegates thus influence the formation of norms of public international law.

Determining the scope of youth delegates' influence on public international law

Youth delegates thus do have influence on public international law. However, the scope of their influence lies in the discretion of regular delegates, as the final say concerning the resolution texts remains with the UN member states. Within this dependency, which is usual in advocacy work, there are many factors that determine the scope of influence of youth delegates. These factors relate to the design of the participation process and to the individuals involved. Concerning the participation process, influence requires that its design allows for earnest interaction between youth delegates and diplomats. Earnest interaction is easier the more a process is institutionalized and thus happens in a regular rhythm and foreseeable structure, without depending on the discretion of one or more individuals. While the program of the Youth Delegates to the UN General Assembly as such has reached a high degree of institutionalization over the past years and thus runs every year as regular part of the work of the four patrons, the institutionalization of the different tasks of the youth delegates varies. The degree of institutionalization impacts on stakeholders' knowledge of their role within the process. The better the knowledge of a person's role within a process, the better they can complete their mandate.

It's necessary to include the process in the regular workload of diplomats, because if lending an ear to a stakeholder group requires them to work overtime, they will be less likely to do so. Factors on the side of the individual delegates include their interest in and understanding of youth participation. Also, delegates' home governments' position on youth participation and their own political affiliation impact on their willingness towards including the youth perspective into their work. Advocacy work is complicated when governments consider the youth perspective relevant for resolutions on "youth-related issues" only. Delegates who appear more conservative are less likely to sympathize with youth than their more liberal or progressive colleagues. Another factor concerns the degree of freedom that the youth delegates have in drafting their speech. The speech is commented on by all four patrons of the program beforehand, which means that the intensity of their interference impacts on the final text of the speech, which in turn can distort the influence that the youth delegates' can exercise with it. Traditionally, however, patrons have limited their comments on gross violations of their official positions only and have thus hampered the influence exercised by youth delegates with their speech very little.

Strengthening youth participation processes

All in all, youth delegates can exercise influence on public international law, but the scope of their influence remains to be determined by regular delegates, i.e. states. Their work is thus far from being tokenism, but still has a way to go before

young voices can unalteredly impact on public international law. If the inclusion of a genuine youth perspective into the work of the UN were the goal, youth participation processes needed to be independent of national delegations. Civil society representatives' dependence of states in the creation of public international law is inherent to the design of the UN as a forum of states as main actors. As the German youth delegates are a kind of hybrid between civil society and regular delegations, criticism of the design of their participation process must always be linked to criticism of the inclusion of civil society into the work of the UN in general.

This post is based on a presentation at the Conference "Jugend im Völkerrecht" which took place in January at the Freie Universität Berlin.

Antonia Kuhn is a student of German and European law at Julius-Maximilians-University Würzburg and works as a student assistant at the professorship for German and international public law, public international law and European law (Prof. Dr. Stefanie Schmahl, LL.M.). In 2018, she served as one of two German Youth Delegates to the UN General Assembly.

Cite as: Antonia Kuhn, "Do youth delegates at the UN have an influence on public international law?", *Völkerrechtsblog*, 15 April 2020.

